

# Protecting adults from domestic violence through multi-agency cooperation with social care

**We are conducting ground-breaking research into the effectiveness of MARACs (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences) that bring together diverse public and voluntary sector agencies to focus on adults facing high risk of domestic violence.**

The death of Mary Russell, 81, at the hands of her frail 88-year old husband of 56 years, has prompted considerable soul-searching. Questions have been particularly asked about the under-researched role that social care should play in protecting elderly adults at risk of domestic violence.

The case indicated poor coordination between many agencies, notably the police. Mrs Russell had called '999' eight times in the seven months before she died of bleeding to the brain in 2011. She had first alerted the police to her violent husband in 2003 when a neighbour found her standing on her doorstep with blood pouring from her nose.

Mrs Russell's case is less uncommon than might be imagined by those who think of domestic violence as affecting mainly young adults and children. In fact, half of the 96,000 adults referred to adult safeguarding services in the year Mrs Russell died were older people.

This perhaps unexpected picture – along with moves to support older people for longer in their own homes – prompted SSCR to fund a study at Manchester Metropolitan University looking at a

relatively new form of inter-agency cooperation designed to protect such adults.

Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences – MARACs – bring together a wide-range of professionals, including, for example, health and social care workers, housing agencies, Women's Aid, police and fire services. Their goal is to prevent homicide, protect adult victims and children, ensure that perpetrators are made accountable for their actions, improve multi-agency working and provide help to those needing it, in a timely way.

'People are identified as being at serious risk of physical, emotional or sexual abuse. This is the high risk end of domestic violence,' explains Professor Hugh McLaughlin, who is leading the research. 'Typically, each of the agencies present will indicate what they know about the individual and what services they are putting in. This detail is put into an electronic database and goes onto a 'Share Point' site that agencies can access. We are looking at how well the MARAC professionals work together and achieve their goals.'



*'Well-functioning MARACs can prevent homicide and protect victims. It's great the system exists – a decade ago there was nothing like this. It's voluntary not statutory. My hunch is that we could be doing this a whole lot better.'*

Professor Hugh McLaughlin, researcher

Participation remains voluntary rather than a statutory requirement for agencies. Caseloads can be heavy. 'Over 100 MARAC cases are reviewed every month in Manchester and, at the meetings I attended, there was not a lot of time per case,' says Professor McLaughlin. 'There must be questions about people's capacity to concentrate on so many cases. The police are the primary referring agency. That very fact suggests that other agencies may be missing important signs.'

This research is timely given the current policy agenda which places means that people are living in their own homes for longer, with someone close to them often operating as their carer or looking after their personal budget. As a result, people can become more isolated and those around them may have considerable power over them.

'We spend a lot of time regulating residential environments and public services for older people,' says Professor McLaughlin. 'What goes on in the domestic environment can be well hidden. It will be worth considering how alert MARACs are to personality change due to dementia. This could be an important issue in the future.'

The team is interviewing people who have, in the past, been subject of MARACs. The overwhelming majority have been female. The team is focussing on groups often missed in the past – such as people with disabilities, migrants and people from LGBT communities. Report recommendations will highlight how MARACs work, the data they should collect and their outcomes – what people value from these conferences and how they could engage people more effectively to ensure better outcomes for those suffering domestic violence.

**Project:** To identify, and assess the effectiveness of social care's contribution to the development of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs) and the protection of adults facing domestic violence

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**Completion:** Spring 2014